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122 lawmakers urge Bush to give inspectors more time

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Washington -- Almost every Bay Area House member has signed a letter to President Bush urging him to give U.N. inspectors in Iraq all the time they need to do their work and to use his State of the Union speech Tuesday to signal that he remains committed to solving the crisis through diplomacy.

In all, 122 House members -- all Democrats -- signed the letter. The members signing the letter included 23 who voted in October in favor of the resolution authorizing Bush to use force against Saddam Hussein's regime.

The letter, which was organized by Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., who supported the war-powers resolution that passed the House 296-133, and Rep. Sherrod Brown, D- Ohio, who opposed it, said inspectors have been at their task for only two months.

"This is an inherently difficult task, requiring patience and perseverance, " according to the House members' letter delivered to the White House on Friday afternoon.

The Bay Area House members who signed were Democrats Anna Eshoo of Atherton,

Sam Farr of Carmel, Mike Honda of San Jose, Barbara Lee of Oakland, Zoe Lofgren of San Jose, George Miller of Martinez, Pete Stark of Fremont, Ellen Tauscher of Walnut Creek, Mike Thompson of St. Helena and Lynn Woolsey of Petaluma.

All voted against the war resolution except Tauscher, who had written her own letter to Bush two weeks ago urging him to allow the inspections to continue in the hopes of pressuring Iraq into a diplomatic solution and building a broad international coalition that would back military action against a recalcitrant Iraq.

The three who didn't sign were Democrat Tom Lantos of San Mateo and Republican Richard Pombo of Tracy, who both voted for the resolution, and Rep. Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, the House minority leader, who opposed the use- of-force resolution last October.

"The best deterrent is to keep the inspectors there," Farr said in a telephone interview from his district. "I represent some of the most conservative areas in America, such as Pebble Beach and areas of military retirees around Fort Ord, and I haven't found one person yet who supports military action now."

"I think that, hands down, it's essential to give the fullness of time to the inspectors to complete their task," Eshoo said. "Rather than going to war, balanced thinking says keep doing what you're doing if it is working."

Woolsey said she hopes Bush uses his State of the Union speech "to say he'll give the United Nations more time to do its job properly and that he'll lay out a plan for peace."

While the administration's rhetoric toward Hussein has grown much more pointed this week, some of the House members said they believed national and overseas opposition to a unilateral U.S. strike on Iraq was growing. Friday brought mixed signals from the Bush administration. With chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix due to deliver an interim report on the Iraq situation on Monday, the Associated Press quoted an unidentified senior administration official as saying the United States would weigh giving the inspectors more time.

The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., said after he and other senators attended a briefing Thursday by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that the inspections would continue.

But at the White House, spokesman Ari Fleischer threw cold water on the idea that more time would make the inspections productive.

"Back in 1991, if the argument 'Let sanctions take place' had taken hold, Saddam Hussein would still be sitting in Kuwait and most likely be occupying other nations as well," he said.

And at the Pentagon, a senior official told reporters that "intelligence sources leave us with the impression and, in fact, the belief that Iraq and specifically the regime has a capability and, in fact, an intent to cause damage or destruction to their oil fields. We see that as a real potential crisis."

Eshoo said the opposition to a war by such allies as France and Germany "has to be very sobering for the administration" and could lead the White House to agree with giving more time for inspections.

"Unilateral approaches are not part of the future," she said.

Brown, the Ohio representative who helped organize the House members to send the letter, said even though it was signed only by Democrats he doesn't want to make a potential war into a partisan issue.

"This is not a partisan issue. I represent a nominally Republican district, and my mail is 28 to 1 against war. . . . We need to put partisan politics aside."

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